

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023*

**Remarks With Prime Minister Leo Varadkar of Ireland at the Congressional Friends of Ireland Luncheon**

*March 17, 2023*

*President Biden.* Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

You have all heard the expression—and this is attributed to a guy named Shane Leslie, who once wrote, "Every St. Patrick's Day, every Irishman goes out to find another Irishman to make a speech to." [*Laughter*] Well, that's why I'm here. [*Laughter*]

I'm glad to be with all of you. And most importantly, I'm glad that we're surrounded by so many friends of Ireland. Here in Washington, we've always been able to work across the aisle on Irish issues no matter what our politics have been, no matter what else we agree or disagree on.

So, Mr. Speaker, thank you for bringing us together again. I was trying to think—I think I've made almost every one of—

*[At this point, a stool fell in the room.]*

Don't get hurt, man. We need you. [*Laughter*] You okay? All right.

The—Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you for bringing us together. And thank you to all the Irish Americans here today who have spent years building a broad bipartisan consensus on the issue of Ireland.

You know, Taoiseach, it's great to see you again. We just spent a little time down in the Oval Office, and we just finished an excellent meeting. So now we can enjoy a little bit of a celebration.

You know, to all the friends and leaders who traveled from Ireland and Northern Ireland, it's wonderful to see so many of you here once more.

I stand here today, like most you, as a descendent of the Blewitts of County Mayo and the Finnegans of County Louth. I was telling the Taoiseach that I—when I would have—as Vice President, I'd always have a breakfast for the Taoiseach before he'd go over to see the President for those 8 years.

The seventh year, I think it was, Nance, that I went in, and the Taoiseach—I brought him into the Oval and he sat down. And before Barack could say anything, he said—he said, "For God's sake, Barack, let the boy come home." [*Laughter*]

*[The President spoke briefly in an Irish accent as follows.]*

"Let him come home."

I swear to God. True story.

And he said, "You keep sending him to places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and all the—let him come home."

And I keep—you have to help me with the Gaelic expression: a hundred thousand welcomes. What's the—

*Prime Minister Varadkar. Céad míle fáilte.*

*President Biden. Céad míle fáilte.*

And he said you'll—he'll get a hundred thousand welcomes. And it was one of the—but he didn't—they didn't plan on my bringing my whole family. *[Laughter]* But literally, we saw thousands of people.

And I was saying that being raised by a grandpop who went to Santa Clara, back in the days when Irish in Northeast Pennsylvania didn't very much get a chance to go to college, and he was an All-American football player at Santa Clara. And he came back as a newspaper guy, on the business side.

And my grandfather used to say that, you know, the—when anything—every time I'd walk out of his house in Scranton, Pennsylvania, when I lived there for a while, he'd look at me and say, "Joey, remember, the best drop of blood in you is Irish." *[Laughter]* And my grandmother would say, "You need more than that." *[Laughter]*

But you know—*[laughter]*—but the fact is that when I went over to Ireland, I—it was—it was a great experience. I'd been to Ireland many times, but not to actually look up to find my actual family members—and there are so many. And they actually weren't in jail. They were all—*[laughter]*.

But all kidding aside, I met the Blewitts and the Finnegans and all of the folks who were—we're related to. Spent 6 days there. And one of the things that—and the Finnegans were from County Louth. And they're still—if you go to County Louth, there's still a place called "Finnegan's Pub," which is—Reverend, it's related to my family. And I'm the only Irishman you've ever met, though, that's never had a drink. So I'm okay. *[Laughter]* I'm really not Irish.

I mean—but look, as many of you know, I, like all of you, take pride in my Irish ancestry. And as long as I can remember, it's been, sort of, part of my soul that I've—how I've been raised. And you know, during the times of darkness and despair, it always, sort of, brings light—strength when you think about what my ancestors went through and what we're going to—through now, and the history that binds us and the values that unite us.

You know, they're values I learned at my grandpop's kitchen table, where he would always—you know, you—my grandpop's kitchen table, particularly on Sunday after 10:30 Mass at St. Paul's, I'd get to—you'd get to wander around the table—you never got to sit down when you were a kid. But he had four sons, and they'd sit there. And another guy from the newspaper, a guy named Tommy Philips, who was, sort of, at the time, the David Broder of the Scranton paper.

And they'd sit there, and they'd talk. And one day, you know, I remember sitting there, and he's talking about a guy that—I didn't understand why he was sticking up for him. And he was the city chairman of the party, whose son was the city chairman when I ran for President.

At any rate—and he was always in trouble. He was, sort of, like a late Mayor Daley. You know, a "brother-in-law on the payroll" kind of thing. And so I couldn't understand. My grandpop was Mr. Rectitude, and I couldn't understand why he was, you know, so—liked him so much.

And he reached up, and I—you could wander the table, you just couldn't sit—and he put his arm around me and said, "Joey, come here." And I knew this was about to be a—you know, a public lesson for Joey. *[Laughter]* And he said, "You're wondering why I like Patty."

And I said: "No, no, no, no, Grandpa. No." And he said, "No, you're wondering"—and he said: "Let me tell you something. He'd look at you and say, 'Ambrose, I'm going to cut your heart out.' And you know he'd mean it. Or 'Ambrose, I'm going to jump off the bridge for you.' Whatever he said he'd do, just remember, do what you say. Do what you say." And he was one of those guys who always did what he said.

And I—he—the biggest thing for my grandfather was: "Joey, never bend, never bow, never kneel, never yield. Never. Never."

And the values I learned from my mom, Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden—she used to say, "Remember, you're defined your courage, and you're redeemed by your loyalty." You're defined by your courage, and you're redeemed by your loyalty.

And my father's values were similar, but he had a saving grace. There was a Hanafree on his mother's side of the family, from Galway. And you know, my dad was one of those guys who taught all of us that everyone, no matter who they are—everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. Everybody. Not a joke.

My father would no more walk through the Hotel DuPont and say hello to the chairman of the board of the DuPont Company we didn't know, but say hello to him and not say hello to the shoeshine guy. That was my dad.

And so, you know, everyone—everyone—is determined—these are the same values that I and all of you, I think, try to pass down to our children about hope and the future. And more than anything, I believe this hope is what beats inside the heart of all of us and all of our people, the idea that there's nothing beyond our capacity if we work at it hard enough.

For generations, it was hope that brought our—our countries together in war and in hardship and in hope that had inspired so many of our ancestors to reach for a future of greater peace and greater security and possibilities. To this day, I think hope still brings us together. Hope. Hope.

I used to drive Barack crazy because I'd always say to him: "Mr. President, the country will never be more optimistic than their President. It's all about hope." It's all about hope.

And to this day, hope still brings us together, and it's going to allow us to achieve big things, in my view. It's important to keep that in mind that—as we approach the upcoming anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. You know, I wish George was here—George Mitchell—who spent a long time—hard to believe, 25 years ago, this year, that the agreement was made. It was—delivered nearly 25 years of progress in Northern Ireland, which, at the time, nobody, I thought, thought was possible. There were still people getting killed, still people getting shot, still people at war with one another.

For years, people found ways to walk—work across party lines and above the differences to make all this happen. But it was a real struggle. But people never gave up. And as I said, giants like—George Mitchell devoted his life to this building and the Congress and the Senate, but he also—he never backed down. He never gave up.

And the Northern Ireland—Irish leaders who are here today, they took a lot of brave steps that were necessary to—so that their children might have a better future. And the Northern Ireland leaders that are here today, let me say how important it was to see you standing shoulder to shoulder with the Chief Constable, Byrne, after your—and affirming your commitment to the future, following the attempted murder of Detective Chief Inspector Caldwell.

Well, I have to continue to work to protect peace and stability. And I met, out in San Diego, with—with the British Prime Minister, and we talked about our commitment to the "Windsor Framework." It's a vital, vital step, and—that's going to help ensure all the people in Northern Ireland have an opportunity to realize their full potential.

And I just keep reminding my family and anybody near me that I'm a big fan of Seamus Heaney. And when he passed away, his wife was kind enough to send me a long, handwritten note and a copy of his poems that he had, some of which he had written by hand.

And one of my—his "The Cure at Troy" is one of my favorites. And he used the phrase—and he said—remember that:

History says, don't hope

On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice [rises] up,  
And hope and history rhyme.

I think we have a chance of making hope and history rhyme, with all our differences. I think those of us who have been coming to this dinner a long time have never been in a case where, from the perspective of the public, the parties and the politics has been so divided as it is now.

But I agree with the Speaker. There's no reason why we can't find common ground. There's no reason why we can't hope to change this direction of the extremes in both our parties are pushing. I think it's important. I think it's really important.

And that is a—that's the power of friendship. I think that's the power of—that's the strength of our partnership if we work at it. And simply put, I think it's the Irish of it. I think it's the Irish of it. So I hope we can turn this breakfast into a—more of an everyday relationship that we—the way we treat everyone in this Congress to just—there are so many possibilities we have.

We can disagree on details, but there's nothing—as I always say, just remember, we're the United States of America. Nothing, nothing, nothing is beyond our capacity. Whatever we've set our mind to in the past, we've done, no matter what.

Let's remember that. That's who the hell we are. That's who we have to continue to be. And that's why I'm here. And I'm so proud to introduce the Taoiseach.

*Prime Minister Varadkar.* Thank you all so much, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Members of Congress, ambassadors, esteemed friends, and colleagues: It means so much for me to be back here again as the leader of our country on this—on our national holiday.

And I'm very pleased that I'm joined in the room by political party leaders from Ireland and Northern Ireland, including Jeffrey Donaldson, Mary Lou McDonald, Michelle O'Neill, Colum Eastwood, Naomi Long, and Doug Beattie, and also the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Chris Heaton-Harris. It's great to have us all in the same room, and it's been good to be able to interact with each other over the past couple of days.

And I have to say, it's a pleasure to be sat next to the Speaker and the President, not to keep the peace, but—[*laughter*—]but rather to thank them for doing so much to protect and promote peace and prosperity on the island of Ireland.

So congratulations, Speaker McCarthy on your election to this great office. And thank you so much for continuing the tradition of the Friends of Irish Luncheon. I know, 2 years ago, in your St. Patrick's Day message, you said that, on this day, "everyone is Irish," a sentiment that I think will find unanimous bipartisan support. [*Laughter*]

And I have to say everyone in Ireland is proud that an Irish American holds the Speaker's gavel. And we wish you the very best in your term as Speaker, and I look forward to working with you on areas of common interest.

As was mentioned earlier, it was on St. Patrick's Day in 1981 that a great American President, Ronald Reagan, first spoke of the search for a just and peaceful solution in Northern Ireland.

Through successive administrations, Members of Congress, the U.S. has played a central role in helping us to find that solution. You made political interventions at pivotal moments, built relationships across parties, and supported communities. And through your contribution to the International Fund for Ireland, you encouraged dialogue and made peacebuilding possible. The

IFI's vital work continues today, thanks in no small part to the advocacy of so many of you here in the room today, and we are so grateful for that.

And as a nation, we will be forever grateful to the Friends of Ireland Caucus for your commitments to Ireland, north and south.

Mr. Speaker, this year is the 40th anniversary of the first Friends of Ireland lunch hosted by Speaker Tip O'Neill—and I had the pleasure to meet his daughter only the other day—and also attended by Ronald Reagan. Reagan and O'Neill shared a vision of the role that the U.S. could play in promoting and securing peace, helped achieved the impossible.

And, Mr. Speaker, as you know, this year is also the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. That landmark achievement was made possible because people chose to believe in the potential for peace and the promise of a better future. A bit like that American way of believing things that anything, in fact, is possible.

The efforts of the parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish and British governments would not have succeeded without your input and steadfast support from all our friends and partners here in the U.S. A cycle of violence that ravaged the island for 30 years or more was broken, and history was made with a remarkable peace agreement based on political leadership, vision, and compromise.

And now we have to complete that work and fulfill the agreement's promise not just of peace, but also of reconciliation to build a shared island together. I know that the people of Northern Ireland want to see their political assembly and devolved government back up and running, and their politicians working to improve their lives.

So much has been achieved since 1998. And today, new generations of young people are growing up with no memory of the conflict their parents endured. And as somebody who grew up in the eighties and nineties, when political violence was an almost everyday occurrence, that is something to be profoundly grateful for.

I believe there are now incredible opportunities for economic development in Northern Ireland, especially with the potential of the "Windsor Framework" recently agreed between the European Commission and the EU Government. Our task now is to complete that mission and to help the people of Northern Ireland to build a more peaceful, a more prosperous, future together.

Mr. Speaker, today we must also remember how Russia is attempting to deny the people of Ukraine any kind of future through its brutal invasion. While Ireland is a militarily neutral country, we're not politically neutral in the face of violations of international law and human rights.

The past 13 months have united us all who believe in freedom and democracy and the rule of law and the U.N. Charter. And we stand with Ukraine because silence means surrender, and we'll not stay silent when liberty, freedom, and fundamental human rights are being attacked. So we will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

And we've seen so many times in history how the story ends if it's not challenged, how appeasement—no matter how well intentioned—ultimately fails. And I have to say I endorse the ongoing cooperation between Europe and the United States to help defend our Ukrainian friends.

In the last century, America led the free world in the fight against fascism and then communism. And in this century, America leads the free world once again. And we thank you for that.

Mr. Speaker, symbols matter. And occasions like today matter as well, because they reinforce the invisible bonds that connect people of different political backgrounds together and

join countries together. Our story is one of friendship and partnership and, above all, a belief in the possible, a belief in the promise of tomorrow.

So thank you again, Mr. Speaker, and happy St. Patrick's Day to everyone.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:19 p.m. in the Rayburn Room at the U.S. Capitol. In his remarks, he referred to Rep. Nancy Pelosi; former President Barack Obama; former Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland; former U.S. Sen. George J. Mitchell, in his former capacity as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland; Chief Constable Simon Byrne of the Police Service of Northern Ireland; Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell, who was shot several times by suspected New Irish Republican Army gunmen in Omagh, Northern Ireland, on February 22; Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of the United Kingdom; and Marie Heaney, wife of Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Prime Minister Varadkar referred to Members of Parliament Jeffrey M. Donaldson and Colum Eastwood and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Chris Heaton-Harris of the United Kingdom; Mary Lou McDonald, president, and Michelle O'Neill, vice president, of the Sinn Fein opposition party in Ireland and Northern Ireland; Naomi Long and Doug Beattie, members, Northern Ireland Assembly; and Susan O'Neill, daughter of former Speaker of the House of Representatives Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jr.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Congressional Friends of Ireland luncheon.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Byrne, Simon; Caldwell, John; Heaney, Marie; Kenny, Enda; McCarthy, Kevin O.; Mitchell, George J.; Obama, Barack; Pelosi, Nancy; Sunak, Rishi; Varadkar, Leo.

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